

White House Conference on Aging Policy Recommendations

**National Association of Foster Grandparent Program Directors (NAFGPD)
National Association of Retired Senior Volunteer Program Directors (NARSVPD)
National Association of Senior Companion Project Directors (NASCPD)**

Background

An elder population explosion is now upon us as 77 million baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964 begin to age. Studies show that boomers who are economically prepared for their later years will be different from other generations as they approach retirement age. These elders want to age positively, stay mentally and physically healthy, and be independent, vital resources to their communities, not dependant *consumers* of services. Typical baby boomers say they will fill their later years with full or part time work, travel, hobbies, and time with family. But they also indicate a need to continue the commitment to effecting social change they began in the 1960's by giving back to their communities and volunteering to further causes that are truly meaningful and will change the world and make it a better place for future generations. Average boomers who have planned well for their later years aren't going to be all that interested in daily, long-term volunteering; instead, they will be attracted by volunteer programs that focus on time-limited, episodic and project-based service that they can seamlessly weave into the rest of their busy lives.

Studies also show that, as baby boomers age, the gap between “haves” and “have-nots” will be even greater. As the baby boomer population ages and the 60+ total population explodes, so, too, will the population of “have not” elders – those whose economic situation has not prepared them to live comfortably in their later years. We cannot exclude the future 16 million elder baby boomers who will be living on very low incomes from gaining the satisfaction of giving back to their communities and helping to change the world. Statistics show that these “have not” elders are just as interested in volunteering and giving back to their communities as are their more well-off baby boomer peers. Yet “have not” elders cannot afford to give significant time in their communities and sometimes lack the resources to even *find* volunteer opportunities. These elders want to volunteer, but they need assistance to enable them to do this, as well as targeted outreach that will find them, recruit them, train them, link them with community agencies that need their services, and retain them.

It is clear that elders are our only *increasing* natural resource. It is important that America harness the energy of this massive boomer generation to help meet the pressing needs of our children, our frail elders, and our communities as they struggle to survive in this increasingly challenging world. There is no need to establish new volunteer programs with new administrative structures to accomplish this, nor is there a need, as some have proposed, to pay elders for their services as an incentive to serve. The three programs of the National Senior Service Corps (NSSC) – Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, the Foster Grandparent Program, and the Senior Companion Program – currently field well over ½ million volunteers in communities across the country, and are positioned to effectively engage baby boomers in significant service that will both meet their emotional needs as well as provide local communities with an army of healthy, committed, and wise volunteers who will help meet vitally important local needs. These three NSSC programs are already firmly entrenched in the service delivery fabric of their communities. They have extensive experience in documenting, tracking and reporting volunteer accomplishments. And, most importantly, they have established administrative structures that can effectively engage large numbers of elders in service as well as be accountable for providing meaningful service opportunities with excellent and cost effective use of federal and local funds.

Over the last 35 years, the federally, state, and locally-funded Retired and Senior Volunteer Program (RSVP) has established a strong community-based infrastructure designed to effectively recruit, place and manage large numbers of volunteers age 55 and older. It provides opportunities for elders to serve their communities in myriad ways and with extremely flexible time commitments. RSVP is cost-effective – meaning it is affordable in the context of the limited federal dollars available in the future – and, with a little realignment, is set up to meet the needs expressed by baby boomers for their later years. We believe that local RSVP programs and the Corporation for National and Community Service need to re-tool and refine RSVP so that:

1. it meets the emotional and intellectual needs of baby boomers and will attract these socially-conscious adults by developing more diversified local service opportunities that will provide them with the sense of satisfaction and accomplishment they want from doing something visibly significant to better their communities, and
2. it meets baby boomers' time constraints by including a more diverse portfolio of project-based and episodic volunteer opportunities so boomers are afforded many choices.

For nearly 40 years, the Foster Grandparent Program (FGP) and the Senior Companion Program (SCP) have provided opportunities for elders 60 years of age and older who are living on very limited incomes to serve over 1,000 hours annually with children who have special needs and frail elders who need companionship. Through federal, local and state funding, FGP and SCP enable elders living on low incomes to volunteer by providing a tax-exempt stipend that makes volunteering affordable by covering any out-of pocket expenses incurred by the volunteers in the course of their daily volunteering. The infrastructure of both programs is designed to attract eligible volunteers as well as to train, place, and supervise them as they volunteer with local community-based non-profits.

The spirit of volunteerism is alive and well in the boomer generation. There is no need to establish expensive and duplicative programs that will do what RSVP, FGP, and SCP already do and have done for nearly 40 years: provide meaningful volunteer opportunities to elders of all economic backgrounds to serve their communities in ways that also meet their own interests. We propose that the White House Conference on Aging include in the policy recommendations that emerge from the 2005 Conference a recommendation that will use the three premier, long-standing, respected, experienced, and cost-effective programs of the National Senior Service Corps – the Foster Grandparent Program, the Retired and Senior Volunteer Program, and the Senior Companion Program – to engage baby boomers in volunteer service that will effectively meet boomers' needs as well as address the challenges our communities face in providing services to their citizens. Specifically:

Begin new RSVP programs in unserved areas and expand existing RSVP programs so that every county in the country is served by RSVP, and re-align RSVP locally and nationally to engage baby boomers by expanding informal, episodic and project-based volunteer opportunities that conform with what studies have shown to be the interests of boomers; and double the current size of the FGP and SCP programs to 80,000 and 36,000 volunteers, respectively, by beginning new programs in unserved areas and expanding existing programs.

NARSVPD, NAFGPD, and NASCPD are membership organizations that represent and advocate for issues that are important to the over 1,400 RSVP, Foster Grandparent, and Senior Companion Program directors and their more than 1/2 million elder volunteers serving communities nationwide.